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Managing stocking density when profit margins are at an all-time low

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When the price of milk continues to result in a negative profit margin, farmers everywhere are looking for ways to help offset costs and increase their cash flow. This is an “interesting” time to be farming to say the least. With milk prices so low, the cost of grain and purchased forages (potential shortage of forages grown on the farm), and beef prices still fairly decent, it creates a unique situation. Farmers who normally overcrowd their freestalls might want to reconsider their stocking density.

I understand that when milk price is so low, that the more cows you milk, the better the meager milk check might seem. That being said, I want you to think about this scenario. If you were to cull the lower producing cows, or those that you know have frequent trouble with feet or high somatic cell counts, you would get a sizable beef check to help with cash flow this month. As for the bulk tank, it has been shown in research studies as well as on farms here in this county, that if overcrowding is reduced, the remaining cows in the group can actually increase in production, milk quality, and overall health. With more time to lay down, better access to water, and better access to the feed bunk, these cows become more profitable. Not to mention, that you no longer have those lower producing “tail enders” eating feed which may be in short supply.

The negative impact on cows really shows when stocking density is 120% or greater. Cows will prioritize rest over eating, and will often stand around waiting for a stall to rest in, rather than go to the bunk to eat. This extra standing time creates extra stress on the hooves, increased cortisol levels which negatively affect the immune system, and decreased blood flow to the uterine horns which can impact fetal growth. And obviously, by prioritizing resting, when they do get to the feed bunk and there is competition, their intakes are lower than they should be. This means they won't produce the milk that they are capable of making!

In these tough financial times, it seems to make sense to focus on the best cows, making each cow as profitable and healthy as possible. I try to think of it as the “tie stall” mentality. At home, we milk 80 cows in a tie stall barn with a parlor. When we have a cow calve in, there are only a certain number of stalls, so another cow has to either be dried off or sent for beef. I realize that is the extreme, and don't expect freestalls to farm that way, but just keep the concept in mind. Think of those cows that you are feeding, trimming feet, spreading your costs over, but they aren't breaking even for you with the current price of milk. Just because you are milking more cows doesn't necessarily mean your milk check is going to be any bigger than if you milked a few less cows that had more room to eat, drink, lay down, and work for you! And those of you with tie stall facilities, keep in mind that each stall doesn't have to be occupied! With feed being in short supply, be sure that those low producing cows are worth having in the barn, especially open low producing cows!

Just for fun, take a look at your cow numbers in each group and calculate your stocking density. If you are over 120%, figure out how many cows you would have to cull or dry off to get below the 120% mark. Calculate how much those lower producing cows are making, and consider those that have really high cell counts that may be negatively impacting your milk quality. Now take into consideration that without those cows, the rest of the pen will have more time to lay down, better access to feed, be healthier, and potentially make you more milk. Just some food for thought!